**this earth is fever hot**

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# this earth is fever hot

by cyclical


Summary

Jack Crawford and his dream team fly down to New Orleans in search of the Bayou Butcher.

or: AU in which Will builds himself a new life as a serial killer in Louisiana instead of teaching at Quantico.


Notes

See the end of the work for notes

The heat is the first thing that hits as he steps off the plane. Hannibal's thankful that he's not wearing a three piece today — had forgone the waistcoat in grudging acknowledgment — but his suit jacket is tailored enough to feel uncomfortably tight, as if everything here shrinks under the Louisiana sun.

Jack, per usual, is less concerned with trivial issues and has plowed his way through the arrivals gate into the waiting arms of local law enforcement, leaving their crew struggling to catch up in a flurry of paperwork and oversight orders. There's a line of armored cars waiting by the gate, and he swings into the first one he sees.

Beverly joins Hannibal wordlessly in the backseat of another, already going to town with the latest incident reports and statement folders, one pen caught between her teeth, the other slid behind her ear. She's pulled her hair up to help with the weather, and Hannibal wishes for a brief moment that he could shed his layers too. Obviously, he does not. His armor is more than decorum for decorum's sake.

"You might wanna get outta that," one of the officers says, eyeing him critically when he steps into lab. "Mosquitos might eat you alive, but heatstroke'll do it to you first."

Hannibal gives her a polite smile. "Perhaps later," he says. Perhaps never, is what he really thinks. He's been years in the medical field; he knows how far he's able to push and get away with it.

"So twelve bodies?" Jack says, appearing at Zeller's elbow.

"Twelve partial bodies," Beverly corrects. She flips open a last file and slides it right-side-up in front of him, tapping her pen against the newest report. "Came up with the floods. Turns out people were poking around in a graveyard every time they went out fishing."

"They're all from the same river?"

"Yes and no," she says. "A grad student was, uh, conducting research in some backwater swamps and found five arms and a chewed up leg instead of an alligator."

"And these are the pieces that've been ID'd so far," Zeller says. "Local's are still churning the waters to see if there are any others."

"Anything traceable?"

"With how long these bodies have been under, I don't want to get your hopes up."

Jack doesn't sigh, but his expression does something tired and complicated. He's been years in the job and none of the murders get any less brutal. He braces his arms on the autopsy table and turns to look at Hannibal.

"Dr. Lecter?" he asks, "Mind having a look?"

"Not at all, Agent Crawford," Hannibal says.

He’s quite curious about this one— the Bayou Butcher, they call him. Leaves his victims at the bottoms of swamps and rivers, chopped up into rough little pieces and only occasionally weighed down. Some of the bigger limbs had the illusion of wire and rock wound around the joints, but the flesh has since rotted through and bone slid right apart.

“There’s no discernible pattern to his kills,” Hannibal says, leaning over to scan each profile. “Nothing to suggest people he’d like to target: relatives, peers, coworkers. The victims have almost nothing in common, no hobbies or outside activities."

“But do you see a connection?” Jack presses, crossing his arms.

Hannibal shakes his head.

“Nothing of note in the statements,” Beverly says, picking up a folder and flipping briefly through it. “There are drug dealers, alcoholics, Christians, college kids, people who’ve never smoked a day in their life. The ages and races are completely scattered. Some of the family were surprised that the bodies ended up down here at all.”

“So we know our guy’s local,” Jack says. “He’s likely got a house or two around town. Familiar with possible dump sites.”

Hannibal agrees. “If this killer is able to transport corpses across state lines and not raise suspicions, he will be very hard to catch, Jack. As far as we know he’s been operating for years in this area without others realizing.”

“You think he’ll disappear?”

“There’s no signs that he will continue or stop killing,” Hannibal says, “The fact that he didn’t display his victims suggests he doesn’t find fun poking at law enforcement, local or government. Perhaps the surfacing of his murders will push him into obscurity. This is a killer who can play the long game. He doesn’t fish often, and he doesn't do it sloppily,” he says, fingers stilling on the open page of someone’s file.

“Fish?” Jack asks, eyebrows raising.

“Perhaps akin to a monster from the deep," Hannibal says, "He rises from the water to take what is his."

“The larger pieces wouldn’t have traveled far, weighed down like that,” Price cuts in. “Locals said those are pretty popular fishing spots,” he says. “Our boy's good.”

Hannibal smiles to himself. Gently. He agrees.

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“They’re borrowing a profiler,” Jack says, sitting the team down in an empty meeting room. “Ex-law enforcement, actually used to be one of our guys until he got shot up during a case.”

Beverly makes a noise, almost sympathetic. “Graham,” she recalls, eyes still on the newer photographs from last night. The silence that follows is stifling, but she turns a page, nonplussed. “We had a class together at the Academy. He gets pulled out one day, and the next we get word he’s become swiss cheese at Stafford.”

“And you remember him after eight years working homicide?”

“Oh, please Jack,” she snorts, finally meeting his eye. “You don’t forget someone like him,” she says. “Bullet holes or not.”

“You two were close?” Hannibal asks.

“I wouldn’t say that,” she says.

The silence is expectant. It’s clear Beverly’s reluctant to share what knowledge she has of him, protectiveness or not, something’s keeping her from opening her mouth.

She presses her lips together before breaking away from the incident reports, arms crossed mulishly. “He was notoriously antisocial,” she finally allows. “Barely showed up for lecture and always sat in the back of the room so nobody could call on him. The only reason he’d gotten so far was because there’s never been anyone quite like him when it comes to profiling.” A pause. Beverly gives Hannibal half a smile. “No offense, Doctor.”

“None taken,” he says.

“He’ll be rude,” Beverly warns. “He hates this job but was always too good at it to stop.”

“You can say that again,” comes a new voice, followed by the sound of the door clanging shut. The look on Beverly’s face isn’t surprised, but rather a pinched sort of resignation, even as she moves up to shield him from the rest of the team. Or maybe shield the rest of the team from him.

Will Graham is simultaneously everything and nothing Hannibal imagined him to be. In his mind, he’d cobbled together the images of a poorly aging cop or someone who looked far too young to be in retirement shoes or a gangly, awkward fisherman, but there Will stands under fluorescent lighting in khaki and plaid with hair curling wild off his forehead, overly uncomfortable in his workwear. Hannibal takes one look at him and is immediately charmed.

“Mr. Graham,” Jack says, extending his arm for a handshake. “My name is Agent Crawford, and I’m with the FBI—”

“I know who you are,” Will interrupts, and brushes the handshake aside so he can get a closer look at the casefiles. Zeller pulls a couple protectively towards himself, but Beverly sends him an arch look and he relinquishes his hold on them, deflating some. “You’ve really gone for the big ones this year, huh.”

“Yes,” Jack agrees. “We have strong reason to believe these are serial murders.”

“You thought right,” he says, voice dry. Then: “Call me Will,” he adds, almost an afterthought.

If Jack is taken aback, he doesn’t let it show. He’s a little heavy-handed on the diversion, but he’s good at keeping the subject about the case, even with Will’s obvious reluctance to being in the meeting room. Or the Department building at all.

“Local PD says you had the highest close rate in the city,” Jack says. “Then Quantico tells me you profiled, and profiled correctly, some of the coldest serial’s in our databank.”

“They were an assignment,” Will mutters under his breath, reaching up to pull the glasses from his face.

“You got shot in the field.”

“Got shot six times in the field,” Will corrects unenthusiastically. “Then I got almost got my throat cut.”

“That wasn’t in your file.”

“Yeah,” he shrugs. “There aren’t a lot of things in my file.”

Jack nods. He could pass as almost amiable, looking like that. “So you from Orleans?”

“Born and raised,” he says, lifting his chin to look him, not quite in the eyes. “Didn’t pass psych eval after that case, so I came home and never got around to leaving.”

“I see,” Jack says. “I see.”

Will moves, almost unconsciously closer to the table, scanning the victim profiles with startling dexterity. Beverly falls in by his side, as if they’d been working together for years. “Am I here to talk about the Butcher or talk about myself, Agent Crawford?” he asks.

Jack raises both hands in mock defeat after a moment. “Sorry,” he says. “Got away from me.”

Will makes a disbelieving noise, but turns back to the scattered reports on the table. He’s still for a moment before he reaches out to reshuffle the entire set and stepping back, apparently satisfied. The labels are skewed and the patterns seem no less coherent than they were before, but he looks more confident in this knowledge than about himself.

“What’s this?” Jack asks.

“His design,” Will says, quiet.

Then he closes his eyes, and is silent for the next four minutes.

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Hannibal somehow finds himself sitting at a bar with Will later that day, drinking shitty beer and pretending it doesn't bother him. He agreed to come more for the company than for the alcohol, and so far all Will seemed to do was never look at him long enough for him to see what sort of company he kept. If he hoarded monsters beneath the facade.

"You don't have to drink that," Will says, out of nowhere. They're across from each other at a table nearly falling apart — less of a table and more of an oversized coin. Hannibal looks up. "The beer here tastes like piss anyway."

"You believe I accepted your invitation unwillingly?"

"I know you wouldn't be caught dead in a place like this back at Baltimore," Will says, leaning back in his chair. He balances on the two back legs, one arm hooked leisurely over the armrest. "I'm curious though," he says. "That suit's not doing much for you."

"They're tailored."

"You know that's not what I mean."

Hannibal smiles. "Perhaps I find you interesting," he says, instead.

Will snorts into his drink. Whiskey, even in ninety degree weather. "I don't."

Hannibal blinks. "Excuse me?"

"I said I don't find you that interesting."

"God forbid we may become friendly," Hannibal says. Will is clearly searching for something, dangling his hook in plain sight. The question now is whether or not he goes to bite. Eventually, Will breaks eye contact and downs the rest of his drink in one go, and Hannibal watches the scarred line of his throat as he swallows.

Here, he thinks of the Bayou Butcher — leaving bodies not meant to be found, killing for killing's sake. What Hannibal didn't tell Jack was the passion behind all the deaths; that there was something else he couldn't quite put his finger on with the bloated, incomplete bodies staring back at him from the autopsy table.

Will Graham, however, with his lined eyes and flattening mouth, the crook of his nose from where it was shattered by either a punch or a wall or the butt of a rifle, who carries a curved knife under his jacket and retired well before his career peaked at Quantico, entertains Jack's profiler alone, of his own volition. Home territory. Hannibal feels rather like a shark in the shallows.

Out of nowhere, Hannibal's phone starts ringing.

"Excuse me," he says, apologetic, before picking up.

"I need you to come in," comes Jack's voice. "I know it's late."

“Agent Crawford,” Hannibal replies, getting to his feet. Will follows. “I’m out with Mr. Graham right now.”

“Bring him with you then,” he says. “The more eyes we can get on this body the better.”

“There’s been another one?” Hannibal asks, and doesn’t have to feign surprise. The river crew’s been working hard.

“Yes,” Jack says. “And it’s whole this time.”

—

Hannibal is disappointed when he gets to lab and sets his eyes on their new waterlogged corpse. He dismisses the killer as wholly unrelated to the Butcher, despite Jack looking close to blowing a gasket.

“He’s right,” Will says. He doesn’t put a hand on Hannibal’s arm, but it’s close — the way his touch hovers. Almost protective. His eyes remain fixed on the autopsy table.

“Tossing was done post-mortem,” Price says. “He was dead before he went into the water.”

“This is a copycat,” Will says.

Jack turns to him. “A copycat?” he asks.

“Or an accident,” he says, gesturing to the corpse. “Completely intact, no body parts weighed down, he probably wasn’t even down there long looking at how much’s been eaten away. The gators need time to discover these things.”

“This victim was found in the same dumping ground as the first twelve bodies.”

“Then he could’ve been swept downstream,” Will points out. “Or they could’ve been swept downstream. There’s nothing here that even suggests these motives are the same, there’s no — no…*passion* behind it.”

Hannibal watches the exchange wordlessly. Beverly was right, Graham’s a better profiler than him. He wouldn’t have been able to pick out the grace the Butcher’s murders without the extensive case files, but Will seems so certain that he’s retracted the steps correctly without any actual reports.

“Okay,” Jack says, conceding to quiet defeat. “So we’re looking at two different suspects here?”

“I wouldn't focus too much on this guy. He's not gonna kill again,” Will says, moving to the table. He accepts Beverly’s offering of gloves, and slips them on without pausing. “Look

here," he says, pointing to lacerations across the victim's face. "You don't get those kinds of cuts from a fist, more like breaking a bottle against someone's face."

Will looks at Jack. "The guys that fish out there know it's illegal in that part of the swamp. They're usually hammered, travel in twos or threes; I'd say our John Doe ticked off his boating partner and got himself into a fight," he catches Hannibal's eye, deliberate. "Dr. Lecter?"

"I concur."

"I can give you a couple names," Will says. "They'll be home tomorrow."

Jack regards him for a long moment without saying anything. Eventually he sighs and pulls his phone out of his pocket to record the rest of the conversation. "You better be right about this, Graham."

Will shrugs. "I am," he says.

—

Will's house is a fortress of swamp and waterway. It takes far too long for Hannibal's liking to find it.

He's forgone the nylon and plastic coverups this time, and hotwires a car on the way over. He even switches out his loafers for sandals instead, then masks his aftershave with a generous helping of bug repellent before staking out Will's house for the night.

He knows a new car in this area is going to draw unwanted attention no matter how much it blends in, so Hannibal toughs it up and leaves it a ways behind, hauling himself high in the trees. There's only one high-legged flood home moated in the dead of the swamp, and he stares down at it from the branches.

He waits for hours — far beyond the sunset, after Will has his dinner and lets his dogs out on the meager patio. There's a boat docked at the bottom of a set of stairs, and it's around two in the morning when Hannibal finally spots a lantern making its way through the house and out the back door.

Will appears, his face haunted with firelight, as he takes the steps two at a time down to his boat. He tosses a net and a pack of knives into the cabin. Big knives, Hannibal notes. Butcher knives.

He climbs in with ease, undocking and starting up the engine without having to see the dashboard properly. The boat makes a low noise, puttering for a moment as Will leans against the steering wheel — relaxed, confident.

Hannibal watches the light disappear down the riverbank before he slips down from the tree, catching bark and tearing fabric in a couple places. As he makes his way through the undergrowth, he finds small comfort knowing these clothes are going straight in the garbage the minute he gets back in town. He pulls himself up to Will's front door.

Jimmying the lock is almost sinfully easy, and Hannibal isn't stupid enough to hit the lights when he makes his way through the living room and to the kitchen. A couple of the dogs look up, but they quiet down when he tosses them half a sausage link from the fridge. Quick thinking saves a lot of lives. Mostly his, usually when he's breaking into other people's homes.

Hannibal's not exactly sure what he's looking for, but he suspects Graham, and his intuition has gotten him far.

The fridge is of little luck. He searches the living room with his flashlight on and pointed at the cabinets, the bookshelves. He doesn't find any hidden floorboards or push-to-open rooms, though he supposes the place is too small to house one. Will sleeps in the common room, the bed cheap and shoved up against the nearest wall.

The bathroom also turns up with nothing. Hannibal's frustrated, but undeterred.

It's only when he gets halfway out to the patio does he notice the air change. A safety clicks.

"Lock the door," comes Will's voice, a good distance from him.

Hannibal does.

"Now take a step to your left," he orders, likely tracking the movement as Hannibal moves to stand with his back against the wall. No windows to his right or to his left, the only way out down the barrel of Will's gun.

His eyes have started adjusting to the dark again. He's impressed that Will was able to see him so quickly.

"How proficient is your night vision?" Hannibal asks.

Will jams his elbow into the wall on his right, and a series of lights flicker on behind him. Enough so that he's awash in yellow-orange, backlit, dripping with river water and keeping his rifle trained on Hannibal's chest. Both of them know he's more than willing to pull the trigger.

"Better than yours," Will replies. He takes a step closer. Hannibal doesn't flinch. "Why'd you come here?"

"To satisfy a professional curiosity."

"You think that warrants breaking and entering into the home of an American citizen?"

"Not a law abiding one."

“Why, Dr. Lecter,” Will says with faux gravitas. “Are you accusing me of being a criminal?”

“I’m certainly in no position to do so,” Hannibal says.

“And your,” Will purses his lips. “Profession curiosity,” he says. “Does it involve that thing I do, or is it about something else?”

“A little bit of both.”

Will snorts. “Oh come on,” he says. “Let’s cut the bullshit, Dr. Lecter.”

“How did you know I would be here?” Hannibal asks, instead.

He gets an annoyed look in response. “I just had a feeling,” Will says. “And I usually trust myself enough to go with it.”

“You took your boat out down the river.”

“I wouldn’t call it a river,” Will says. “I do realize I live in a swamp. That’s not a truth I hide from.”

“I didn’t hear you coming.”

“I parked downstream,” he says. “Then I swam.”

Hannibal sizes Will up silently. The rifle isn’t an issue; it’s less helpful in close combat, and he’s always been good with working fights around guns. He’ll just have to get creative with what’s lying around, though he knows the clothes Will wears could be hiding more than expected. He’s a predator draping himself in mud and twigs and cheap cloth, forcing the rest of the world to look away.

Dripping with swamp water and algae, Hannibal sees a creature of entirely different breed. Will’s too-sharp teeth and his curled lips, the blood spotting the back of his hands, the worn stock of his rifle. This is a man who is deliberate and not quite human. He was born in Louisiana heat, burying seventeen butchered bodies in the marsh growing underfoot.

They stare each other down for a long while. Slowly, Will lowers his rifle. Hannibal’s arms go with it.

Will takes a step closer, rolling his shoulders so his jacket falls to the floor in a heap. He slides a knife into his hand — tinted purple and wickedly sharp. Hannibal doesn’t need to check to know the balance is just right, that Will’s more comfortable with the intimacy of violence than with a gun. The rifle was beautiful, polished and taken meticulous care of, but it wasn’t him. It wasn’t his design.

By now, they are nearly toe to toe. Will does not take his eyes off Hannibal. He reaches out and presses the tip of his knife to the side of Hannibal’s neck, lets it draw blood. Neither of them react, though Hannibal feels a pang of hunger. God, how he wants.

“I’m going to ask you again,” Will says, voice dropped low. The knife digs a little deeper. Not enough to maim, just enough to get the message across. “Why did you come here, Hannibal?” he asks.

“I wanted to know if you could see me.”

“I can,” he murmurs. He drags the knife lower, across Hannibal’s throat. It leaves a shining mark of red that bleeds into his collarbone. “I always have.”

“I can see you too,” Hannibal rasps, barely a whisper.

“But not until now.”

“I had my suspicions.”

“From the start?”

Hannibal is silent. Will tries not to laugh.

“Okay,” Will says. “Not from the start.” Then: “Take off your suit. I want to see you.”

“Will—”

“I said do it,” he says. “You’re afraid I can’t handle a monster like you, Ripper?"

Hannibal presses his lips together.

Will shakes his head, slow. “You were very good at hiding,” he murmurs. Then, as if he's letting him in on a secret, “but I'm very good at looking.”

Hannibal struggles to speak. “Will you come back with me?”

They are both silent. Will doesn't disagree.

Hannibal closes his eyes for a moment. He breathes in the smell of muddied air and water, the heat, the humidity. He thinks of purple-pink knives separating flesh from bone and deciding which of the pieces to weigh down with stone, taking pleasure in his craft.

“I was always jealous of the Bayou Butcher,” Hannibal confides quietly, eyes opening. “A much more elegant name than mine.”

“Not many swamps in Virginia, I’ll give you that,” Will replies, and his expression softening by degrees.

Will takes the knife away from his neck. The sound of metal clattering to the floor is ignored as Will surges up and wraps both arms tight around Hannibal’s shoulders, burying his face into the mess of blood and beaded sweat at the junction of his neck, delirious with emotion.

“Stay with me,” Hannibal says.

“The FBI’s gonna be looking to catch a killer,” he says.

Hannibal smooths hair off Will’s forehead. "Then we'll give them a killer."

“Fuck,” he says. He wipes tears from his eyes, or what could be swamp water. “The house'll stand without me. I just need the dogs.”

“Of course,” Hannibal says.

“I can finish packing by tonight. I don’t even have that many clothes or anything—”

“I will provide for you,” Hannibal interrupts drily. “Do not worry.”

“By making me wear three piece suits all the time?” he asks, already on the move. He strips his shirt off with marked efficiency, making quick work of his belt and shoes as well. "Show me off to all your rich friends?"

“I,” Hannibal falters. “Certainly wouldn’t mind.”

Will lets out a laugh, more exhale than sound. “Okay,” he agrees. “Okay, yeah, what the hell. I’ll bring a change of clothes and all the dogs’ stuff and we’ll be on the next flight out.”

“It may be difficult to secure transportation for all your pets.”

Will pauses by the door of the bathroom. He looks at Hannibal over his shoulder, one hand on the fly of his khakis. “You’ll figure it out though,” he says.

“You seem very certain.”

Will smiles like a shark: all teeth and too much bite, and doesn't bother with a reply.

—

In the end, Will ends up framing someone local for the murders. Hannibal, evidently, is agreeable to the circumstances.

The guy had been into child pornography and the like, and it was simple matter of leaving trace evidence around his boatyard before FBI descended upon his home like a swarm of well-armed locusts. Hannibal had been booking plane tickets for Will during the arrest.

Their flight left in a little over 48 hours, and Will spent three of them sneaking himself through the holding cells at Orleans’ headquarters and murdering their suspect. He dies without struggle, can’t scream in more than a gurgle after Will slits his throat.

When they land in Baltimore, it takes Will a second to reconcile with the fact that Hannibal owns a Bentley.

“What the fuck,” he says, stopping in the middle of the valet parking lot. Hannibal watches him, amused, from where he’d been straightening out the cuffs of his sleeves.

“Is something wrong?”

“Yeah, there’s something wrong,” Will says. He turns to look at Hannibal. His expression is pained, a little wounded. “That car's more expensive than anything I've ever owned."

“I promised I would provide for you.”

“Shit, I didn’t think this through,” he says, putting a hand to his forehead. “Your house must be awful,” he says, refusing to budge until Hannibal takes Will’s suitcase from him to load into the trunk. “Don’t touch that,” Will says. “It’ll ruin your upholstery.”

“What is the point of beauty if it remains unmarred?”

Will covers his eyes with one hand. “I’m regretting this already,” he says, despairing, but gets in the car anyway.

End Notes

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